United States Department of Agriculture
NRCS Natural Resources
Conservation Service

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SOP Title: Editing Documents **May 17, 2005**
Deputy Area / Division: Deputy Chief for Management, Management Services Division
Revision: **Page 1 of 15**

1. Purpose:

To provide the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for documents submitted for editing to the Management Services Division.

2. Scope:

This SOP is for all NRCS employees preparing and submitting directives, Federal Register notices, and handbooks.

3. Outline of Procedure:

4.1 Author's Responsibilities
4.2 Editor's Responsibilities

4. Specific Procedures:

4.1 Author's Responsibilities

Exhibit 1, "A Few Guidelines To Help You Write NRCS Documents," is provided.

A. Prepare double-spaced document in proper format, adhering to the style appropriate for the document; e.g., Government Printing Office (GPO), USDA, or NRCS.

B. Submit document to the Directives and Records Management Team at USDA/NRCS, 5601 Sunnyside Avenue, Room 1-2184C, Beltsville, MD 20705-5460, and by e–mail, with the electronic track changes "off."

C. Review edited document and reconcile any questions with the editor.

D. Submit final document to the Directives and Records Management Team for publication.

4.2 Editor's Responsibilities

Depending on the document size and line spacing, the time required to edit a document may range from 1 to 30 days. Documents will be edited in order of receipt and level of priority.

A. Review and edit text, tables, and illustrations for correct punctuation, grammar, syntax, consistency, clarity, conciseness, and order of content.

B. Ensure that the document adheres to a prescribed style (GPO, USDA, NRCS, or other source guidelines).

DIST: E

The Natural Resources Conservation Service provides leadership in a partnership effort to help conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment

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C. Correct basic mistakes, query the author about ambiguous areas, and advise author about how to amend and improve the document. Queries, comments, and recommendations will be in writing, either on the applicable page or attached to the document.

5. Technical Contacts:

/s/ 5/4/05

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Exhibit 1 - A Few Guidelines To Help You Write NRCS Documents

EDITORIAL KEY

Circled punctuation mark = Make a period

]	Move right
[	Move left
|	Align
□	Indent one space
□□	Indent two spaces
ctr	Center the words within the space or over the column
sp	Spell out
≡	Capitalize (three lines under letter or word)
¶	Begin a new paragraph
A	(diagonal through a capital letter) = Lowercase the letter
/	(diagonal through a punctuation mark **or** lowercase letter) = Delete
~~word~~	Delete the word(s)
∩	Decrease space
ʌ	Insert the word, letter, or character here (specify)
#	Insert one space
⌒◡	Transpose
—	em dash
–	en dash

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS AND COMMENTS

Please review your document **carefully** for consistency.

Avoid unnecessary repetition.

Eliminate noun strings. (*See* **noun strings** in the alphabetical list.)

Eliminate unnecessary nominalizations. (*See* **nominalizations** in the alphabetical list.)

Avoid numbering items in a list (*1.*, *2.*, *3.*, *et seq.*) unless you are ranking the items or indicating a sequence of steps or events.

Public Law: The U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) Style Manual does not accept any abbreviation for “public law” in text. However, if you must abbreviate public law in tables and on illustrations, use **P. L.**

Instruction or course of action:

Use **"must"** to indicate **mandatory** activity.
Use **"may"** to indicate **optional or elective** activity.
Use **"must not" or "may not"** to indicate **prohibited** activity.
Use **"will"** to indicate **future** activity.

Numerals and spelled-out numbers:

Use figures (numerals) in **tables**, in **tabulations**, and on **illustrations** because space is limited: *3 or 4 paragraphs* and *2 to 3 pages*.

Use spelled-out numbers in **text** for units of measure under 10: *one year* or *six months,10 years,* 30 years (10 or more) BUT nine years. (Management Services Division adopted this exception to GPO style in 2000.)

Initialisms are abbreviations *pronounced letter by letter*. Some initialisms for organizations traditionally have *the* before them (*the* FBI), others do not (NRCS).

HIV—human immunodeficiency virus
DNA—deoxyribonucleic acid
UFO—unidentified flying object

Articles *a* and *an* with initialisms: If the first letter of the initialism has a vowel *sound*, use ***an***—not ***a***—before it:

an *NRCS employee****,*** ***an*** *FAA regulation*, ***an*** *REA decision*

BUT

a *USDA policy*, ***a*** *PTA meeting*

Avoid splitting infinitives. Although some authorities approve of split infinitives, careful usage demands that splitting be avoided unless a strange or clumsy construction results. Sometimes an infinitive must be split to gain the meaning intended.

Visitors are asked to please check their packages at the guard's desk before entering the museum.

The "please" must be placed within the infinitive so that it may modify the whole idea of *being kind enough to check the packages*.

To really understand the problem, you must attend the lecture.

Other placements of "really" make the sentence awkward. [Try them and see.] In this sentence, "really" adds emphasis. Split your infinitive only for very good reason!

The word **"its"** is the possessive form of *it*. ***The eagle repaired its aerie. The sun is doing its best to shine through the clouds.*** **It's** is a contraction for *it is* or *it has*; however, contractions are rarely acceptable in formal writing.

GPO NOTES

The online version of the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO) Style Manual—2000 edition is at http://www.gpoaccess.gov/stylemanual/browse.html.

CAPITALIZATION [GPO 3.2–3.52]*

Capitalize—

A short word used in juxtaposition with a capitalized word of like significance.

Buildings ***In*** or Near Chicago

A short word that is the last word if it would be the only lowercase word in the heading.

All Votes Are ***In***

First element of an infinitive.

Controls ***To*** *Be* Applied
Topics ***To*** Consider

BUT

Aid Sent ***to*** Disaster Areas

Do not capitalize—

A common noun used with a date, number, or letter, merely to denote time or sequence, or for the purpose of reference, record, or temporary convenience:

abstract B
amendment 5
figure 7
appendix C
column 2
exhibit 1
table 10
paragraph 4

Punctuation [GPO 8.1–8.148]

GENERAL: Place the comma and final period inside quotation marks. Place other punctuation marks inside quotation marks only if they are a part of the matter quoted.

Place the semicolon outside quotation marks except in congressional and certain other classes of work showing amendments, and in court work with quoted language.

Do not use a semicolon where a comma will suffice.

*Information within the brackets refers to the chapter and item number in the GPO manual.

APOSTROPHE [GPO 8.11–8.13]

Use an apostrophe–

To indicate possession and to indicate coined plurals of letters, figures, and symbols.

ABC's p's and q's RIF's

Do not use an apostrophe–

To indicate plural or spelled-out numbers, of words referred to as words, and of words already containing an apostrophe.

twos, sevens	ups and downs
ifs ands, or buts	yeses and noes
BUT	
do's and don'ts	which's and that's

COMMA [GPO 8.34–8.59]

GENERAL: Place comma inside quotation marks.

Use a comma—

- After each member within a series of three or more words, phrases, letters, or figures used with *and, or,* or *nor.*

  Red, green**,** and blue Dana, Marion**,** and Dale

- To separate thousands, millions, etc., in numbers of four or more digits.

  3,205 40,726 2,380,410

- Inside a closing quotation mark.

  "Compensation**,**" an essay by Emerson, is available upon request.

- After year in complete dates within a sentence.

  the May 3, 1997**,** report from June 4, 1999**,** to July 3, 2000

Do not use a comma—

- Between superscript figures or letters in footnote references.

  Numerous examples may be cited.$^{1\ 2\ 5}$

- Between the month or season and the year in dates.

  March 1999 summer 2000

PERIOD [8.103–8.105]

GENERAL: Place period inside quotation marks.

Use a period–

- In place of a parenthesis after a letter or number denoting a series or list in text.

a.	1.
b.	2.
c.	3.

- After abbreviations, unless otherwise specified.

fig. Ph.D.
BUT
kg NY

Do not use a period (except for abbreviations)—
- After lines in title pages.
- After center, side, and running heads.
- After boxhead titles (in tables).

QUOTATION MARKS [GPO 8.127–8.144]

GENERAL: Place the comma and the final period inside quotation mark.

When quotation marks and footnote reference numbers occur together, the quotation marks precede the reference numbers.

The Chief agreed that the award was "questionable." [1 3]

Try to limit quotation marks to three sets (double, single, double).

"The question in the report is 'Can an alien be considered a "bona fide" U.S. citizen?' "

Use quotation marks—
- **To enclose direct quotations.**
  She said, "This is my final answer."
- **To enclose any matter following such terms as *entitled, titled, the word, The term, marked, designated, classified, named, endorsed, cited as, referred to as,* or *signed.***
  The act titled "The River and Harbor Act" will need your vote.
  The editorial "Haphazard Budgeting" ["titled" implied]
  All mail marked "Urgent" must be delivered this afternoon.
- **To enclose titles of addresses, articles, books, captions, chapter and part headings, editorials, essays, headings, headlines, et al.**

Do not use quotation marks—
- **To enclose names of magazines and newspapers.**
  The *New York Times* is on the table.
- **In indirect quotations.**
  Tell her yes. He will not say no.

NUMBERS [GPO 12.4–12.28]

NUMBERS EXPRESSED IN FIGURES [GPO 12.4–12.9]

GENERAL: The use of figures to indicate units of measure or units of time does not affect the use of figures for other expressions within a sentence.

Each of the six girls earned 55 cents an hour.
Each of the 12 girls earned 55 cents an hour.

Use figures—

- **For a single number of 10 or more except for the first word in a sentence.**

  10 horses 30 ballots 56 employees

- **When 2 or more numbers appear in a sentence and 1 of them is 10 or more:**

  Each of 15 major commodities (9 metal and 6 nonmetal)

  BUT

  Each of nine major commodities (five metal and four nonmetal)

- **For fractions:** Fractions in a unit modifier.

  ½-inch pipe ¼-mile run 7/8-point rise

- **For decimals**: In text, place a zero before a decimal point if there is no unit, but do not add zeros after a decimal point unless they indicate exact measurement.

  0.25 inch 0.75 foot 0.1314

  BUT

  .30 caliber

- **For mathematical expressions:**

  multiplied by 3 divided by 6 a factor of 2

- **For measurements:**

  7 meters 6 acres 1 gallon 1½ miles

- **For serial numbers:**

  Bulletin 425 document 36 lines 7 and 8
  chapter 3 pages 536–542 paragraph 4

- **For measurement and time, actual or implied:**

  6 years old at the age of 9 (*years* implies)

- **For clock time:**

  3:30 p.m. 10 a.m. half past 2

- **For dates:**

  May 1998 March 12 to April 10, 1944 May, June, and July 2002

  NOTE: *A.D.* precedes a year; *B.C.* follows a year: A.D. 937 254 B.C.

- **When referring to a fiscal year, consecutive years, or a continuous period of 2 years or more, when contracted.**

  1900–11 2000–01

- **Upon change of century:**

  1898–1902 1999–2003

- **For two or more nonconsecutive years, use a comma instead of a dash:**

  1985, 1989, and 2004

  BUT

  2001, 2003–2005

- **For time (NRCS documents only):**
  6 hours 8 minutes two years one calendar year three fiscal years
  BUT
  Four centuries three decades one-half hour

If *from* precedes the year or *inclusive* follows the year, do not shorten the second year; use *to* instead of the dash.

from 1997 *to* 1998 1996 *to* 1997, inclusive

NUMBERS SPELLED OUT [GPO 12.16–12.28]

GENERAL: Treat alike any related numbers appearing at the beginning of a sentence, separated by no more than three words.

Fifty or sixty miles will be traveled by nightfall.
Fifty or, in some cases, almost 60 applications were filed.

A spelled-out number should not be repeated in figures except in legal documents. In legal documents, use the following forms:

five (5) dollars, not five dollars (5) ten dollars ($10), not ten ($10) dollars

SPELL OUT—

- **Numbers at the beginning of a sentence or heading.**

- **Numbers in proper names or in connection with serious and dignified subjects.**
  the Thirteen Original States the Ninety-ninth Congress

- **Numbers when a number of less than 100 precedes a compound modifier containing a figure spelled out.**
  two ½-inch boards twelve 4-inch tiles
  BUT
  120 8-inch boards three six-room houses

- **Indefinite expressions** (Words such as *nearly, about, around, approximately*, etc., do not constitute indefinite expressions.)
  the eighties midtwenties fortyfold
  BUT
  1 to 3 million about 6 pounds mid-1990's 4½-fold

- **Fractions standing alone, or if followed by *of a* or *of an*.**
  three-fourth of an inch one-half inch one-tenth
  one-half of a farm two-thirds of 1 percent

ALPHABETICAL LIST

Bold letters in the following alphabetical list are used to draw attention to the correct style and how the word or term should be treated in text.

A

agency

agribusiness

a.m. (before noon); **p**.m. (after noon)

Annual **P**lan of **W**ork, **P**lan of **W**ork, and **A**rea **Plan**, *but* the **p**lan

appendix: [According to GPO, the "a" in "appendix" is uppercase (within a sentence) only when "appendix" is part of the formal title. Note the following examples:

> *See Form 1040: Individual Income Tax Return and Appendix D: Rates of Impending Poverty.*
>
> or
>
> *See form 112240 and appendix.*
>
> or
>
> *See form 112240 and appendix A.*
>
> or
>
> *See form 112240 and* ***A****ppendix A: Municipal Centers.*

assure and ensure: In most cases, "assure" requires a specified or strongly implied *direct object*: Either use "ensure" or rewrite to clarify the direct object.

attachment A

B

Bullet items should be indented; however, if you must make them "flush left," do so consistently. Begin each bullet entry with a capital letter ("initial cap") even if it has no end punctuation.

C

commas:

> Before a parenthesis: Do not use a comma before a parenthesis unless it is a series that includes parenthetical "callouts":
>
> (1) xxxxxxxxxxx**,** (2) xxxxxxxxx**,** (3) xxxxxxx**,** and (4) xxxxx.
>
> In series: Use a comma after each member within a series of three or more words, phrases, letters, or figures (and before *and*).

cost-share (adj.) and cost-sharing (v.): Although the verb form usually is not hyphenated, hyphenate it so that it agrees with previously published information.

county **o**ffice

criteria and criterion: this criter*ion* (singular); these criter*ia* (plural)

cross section, cross-sectional

D

Dashes: Although there are several different kinds of dashes that differ in length and use, only two are discussed here: the em dash and the en dash. Note that there are no spaces before or after any of the dashes. (*See* GPO chapter 8.)

- Em dash (—)
  - To separate two public laws or to show a range: 85–1**—**85–20.
  - To emphasize or explain: He stayed awake 130 hours—nearly an entire week.
  - To separate a subordinate, modifying element from the main element in a name: University of Wisconsin—Madison
- En dash (–)
  - To connect continuing or inclusive numbers (dates, time, or reference numbers):

    2001–04   11:30 a.m.–3:00 p.m.   pp. 23–36

    Do not use the en dash when *from* or *between* is used before a word or number; use *to* or *and.*

    from 1996 *to* 2003 (never *from* 1996–2003)   *between* March *and* June
  - In a combination of (1) figures, (2) capital letters, or (3) figures and capital letters:

    Public Law 107–171   exhibit 6–A   section 12 (a)–(f)

[NOTE: To locate dashes on your computer, click *Insert*, then *Symbol*. Under *normal text* on the far left side of the chart, the en dash is usually directly under the (uppercase) Ữ; the em dash is usually under the (lowercase) ữ.

decisionmaker, decisionmaking

drawdown (one word)

E

E-mail (beginning a sentence only); **e-**mail

e.g.—i.e.: The Latin abbreviation “e.g.” *(exempli gratia)* means “for example.” It introduces an illustration or example, not a complete list.

John likes contact sports (e.g., basketball and wrestling.)

[John likes other contact sports as well.]

On the other hand, “i.e.” *(id est)* means “that is.” It introduces a comprehensive definition or explanation.

***Maria loves to perform in the theater; i.e., she enjoys the feedback from a live audience*.**
[The feedback is the only reason Maria likes to perform on the stage.]

NOTE: Do not use *e.g.* or *i.e.* in the same clause or phrase with *etc.*

em dash: See *Dashes*.

en dash: See *Dashes*.

F

Federal
Federal **G**overnment
federally
field **o**ffice

G

general public: Redundant; use *public* instead.

Government: a national entity (e.g., Italian., British, Canadian)
government: State, county, city, municipal, Territorial, Tribal

H

hyphen: Use a hyphen between the two sets of ZIP codes.

I

impact: Avoid using *impact* as a verb; such as in, "The lack of computers will impact production." Instead, say that the lack of computers *will have an impact* on production.

Internet, **I**ntranet

L

land users
landowners
lifespan

M

"Man-made" is not acceptable in Federal documents; use *fabricated, artificial, manufactured*, *hand-built, constructed,* etc.

N

Nation: Capitalize when used as a synonym for "United States."

National, **n**ational: Usually capitalized only when used in conjunction with a capitalized name (e.g., **N**ational Archives, **NRCS** **N**ational Headquarters, FSA **N**ational Office), *but* "on a **n**ational level." However, when the word "**S**tate" is part of the series in which "national" appears, capitalize "National" for the sake of consistency; e.g., **S**tate and **N**ational Offices.

National **P**rogram **M**anager

Nominalizations are verbs and adjectives that have been changed into nouns. Often these nominalizations end with ***-ion, -tion, -ment, -ant, -ent, -age, -ance, -ancy, -able, -ity, -ty, -al,*** and even ***-ing***).

Verb	Nominalization
calculate	calculations
drain	drainage
responsible	responsibility

Adjective	Nominalization
contaminated	contamination
different	difference
difficult	difficulty

Keep your writing vibrant; avoid unnecessary nominalizations.

USE except for (instead of *with the exception of*).
USE suggests (instead of *makes suggestions*).
USE recommends (instead of *makes recommendations*).

nongovernment
nonprofit
nontechnical

Noun strings (or adjective-noun strings) are groups (strings) of words stacked up in an attempt to modify a single word. Although noun strings are common in science, technology, and government, that doesn't make them good professional style. And the longer the string, the longer it takes the reader to figure it out:

The employee compensation level evaluation procedures are in place.

Use prepositions to help eliminate noun strings:

Procedures for evaluating the compensation level of employee are in place.

O

onsite, offsite

P

Part: 7 CFR Part 1400 *et al.*

per: Do not use *per* as a synonym for "in accordance with," "in keeping with," and similar expressions. ***We will send you parcel in accordance with*** (not per or as per) ***your instructions. In keeping with*** (not *per*) ***the established protocol, we will proceed.***

periods: Use periods at end of sentences or fragments that include a verb form, not at the end of simple list items.

per-unit cost

postal abbreviations: Use the USPS two-letter State and Province abbreviations (no period) in all addresses.

Program **M**anager

R

RC&D **A**rea, the **A**rea
RC&D **A**rea **P**lan
RC&D **A**rea **O**ffice
RC&D **C**ouncils
RC&D **C**ouncil **P**lan
a**n** RC&D **O**ffice; **a**n RC&D **O**ffice
a**n** RC&D **p**roject
RC&D **s**taff

Regional **C**onservationist

a**n** RMS

S

State: Capitalize *State* when it refers to an internal division of a country or nation; lowercase *state* when it refers to a nation or country.

State **C**onservationist
State **P**rogram **M**anagers
State **O**ffice

statewide, multi**s**tate

T

Telephone numbers: Instead of *en dashes,*use hyphens. Use only one of the following forms: 703-555-1234 **OR** 703/555-1234 **OR** (703) 555-1234

NOTE: Use of the hyphen instead of the en dash in telephone numbers is an exception to GPO specifications.

toward (not toward*s*)

third-party vendors

Tribal **g**overnments

Tribe

U

underway**—**under way: *Underway* is an adjective that means "occurring, performed, or used while traveling." ***The underway refueling was successful.*** The two-word form is often misspelled as one word. *Under way*, is an adverb that means "in progress." ***The refueling is under way***. [Hint: *Under way* usually follows a verb.]

U.S.—not **US—**is the GPO-preferred adjectival form of the noun "United States."

V

Via means “by way of,” not “by means of.” ***We drove to Arizona via old Route 66. We decided to send the message by e-mail.***

W

Washington, **DC**
Web, **W**orld **W**ide **W**eb
whole-farm plan

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Revised 2005

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